

HELP WOMEN TAP DIGITAL ECONOMY

I WAS pleased to hear that the virtual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation 2020 (APEC 2020) meeting would be hosted by Malaysia for the first time ever.

I believe the meeting's main theme, "Optimising Human Potential Towards a Resilient Future of Shared Prosperity: Pivot, Prioritise, Progress", indicates APEC members' commitment towards strengthening human capital, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, as an economist, I am more interested in the second theme — Inclusive Participation Through Digital Economy and Technology. I think the adoption of this theme is timely.

The digital revolution has provided massive opportunities for all segments of society to gain benefits. However, amid my excitement, I

asked myself a rhetorical question — how far has the digital revolution benefited those in rural communities?

Sadly, as I see it, there still exists a digital divide between urban and rural areas. And the issue is becoming more critical by the day.

My excitement returns upon discovering that one of the second theme's priority areas is the empowerment of women, especially those in rural and suburban areas.

This further fuels my hope of seeing the digital divide be bridged so that these women can also become active participants in the digital economy.

They need to be supported with assistance — digital infrastructure, Internet connectivity and skills training — without which the target of having inclusive participation

from these women, or all communities for that matter, in the digital economy may not be realised.

Feeling connected to the second theme, I recall one of our projects, led by me, funded by the Higher Education Ministry under the Niche Research Grant Scheme. It included several social and computer scientists. It ran for five years, from 2015 to 2019.

Our goal was to empower rural women in Setiu, Terengganu, to improve their livelihood through entrepreneurship. These women were from the Bottom 40 per cent group and unemployed. What motivated us throughout the project was seeing their strong eagerness and commitment to creating a source of income and change their lives for the better.

What set this project apart was

that we not only taught these women entrepreneurial skills, but we also introduced them to the digital world. It was a great challenge to transform these women for the better in five years.

But we successfully educated these women, engaging and transforming them into who they are today: women entrepreneurs with digital skills who conduct business on digital platforms.

For us, the project was a significant contribution to society. We could not have done it without the support of many, including the ministry, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Nor Aieni Mokhtar and dedicated staff from UMT's Centre for Research and Innovation Management.

I would like to end with an inter-

esting fact. If the Prihatin economic stimulus package has made hypothetical Makcik Kiah a household name among television viewers, our project has made a real Makcik Kiah a household name among online buyers.

Her real name is Puan Rokiah and she is now a successful online entrepreneur selling homemade rempeyek to many customers, most of whom are hooked on her deep-fried savoury crackers.

As Malaysia plays host to APEC 2020, I am as equally eager to see more Makcik Kiah selling their products on Lazada and Shopee.

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